

PSALM 72 AND MICAH 5:1: THE PRIMORDIAL MESSIAH

YAAKOV JAFFE

The Babylonian Talmud (*Pesachim* 54b, *Nedarim* 39b) lists seven things which are so much a part of the fabric of the universe that their origins precede creation. No Jew could imagine a universe without Torah, or without the concepts of repentance and reward & punishment – and therefore these must have existed before the creation of the rest of the world. As Rabbeinu Nissim explains “It is impossible to have a world without them!” Strangely, however, the Midrashic traditions include the identity of the Messiah as something which precedes the dawn of time as well, despite the fact that (a) as a human being with biological parents, it is difficult to imagine what it means that the Messiah’s identity precedes creation, (b) were it not for the sins of Israel (an event that surely followed creation of the world) there would be no need for a Messiah to redeem them in the first place, and (c) many human beings have held the title of Messiah, and had the story of the world and the sins of mankind gone differently, the actual identity of the Messiah would have changed, and not remained constant.¹

Taking a step back, an essential question in the study of any tradition or Midrash is whether the teaching is best understood as being designed to convey a philosophical or theological truth or as designed to provide the best interpretation of a challenging biblical verse. At times, the key to understanding a difficult Midrash is realizing that the Midrash in question exists to elucidate a difficult or challenging biblical verse and not to convey a philosophic idea. This essay will take the approach that this otherwise difficult Midrash about the identity of the Messiah is actually designed to interpret a difficult biblical verse, and not to convey a point in Jewish theology. Thus, we must be responsive to the Bible in our interpretation, instead of considering how the Midrash relates to Jewish Thought.

We will investigate the biblical verses that serve as the underlying basis of the Midrash in an attempt to understand its greater meaning. This task will

Rabbi Dr. Yaakov Jaffe serves as the rabbi of the Maimonides Minyan and as the Director of Tanakh Studies at the Maimonides School. He received his ordination and doctorate from Yeshiva University, where he holds graduate degrees in Bible, Jewish History, and Jewish Education.

first bring us to the difficult Psalm 72 which the Midrash, itself, cites as its source – and then proceed to investigate other verses that might have provided an alternative inspiration for the Midrash.

A key aspect to any study of Midrash is recognizing that Midrashim often appear to be written in response to specific biblical verses, when they are in actuality based on other verses, not cited in the specific Midrash. Though it is not entirely clear why the Midrash would choose to cite other verses in place of its actual sources, the phenomenon is a self-evident aspect of understanding Midrash as can be attested to by numerous examples.²

PSALM 72

The 72nd Psalm is challenging on account of its content, its genre, its authorship, and its use of language. Most Psalms begin with a title that identifies the author, and – at times – the occasion of the Psalm. Though some controversy exists as to identifying the exact identity of some of the authors,³ the rough cast of authors of the Psalms are otherwise well-known, and recur throughout the Psalms (David, Asaf, sons of Korach – see especially I Chronicles Chapters 15-16, 25). A minority of the Psalms specify an occasion⁴ (3, 18, 30, 34, 51-60,⁵ 63, 142 and the perplexing 137⁶), but the bulk of the Psalms in the first section of the book through chapter 89 (and also 138-144) specify an author.

The first word of Psalm 72 reads *To Solomon*, but is Solomon the author (Targum, opinion cited by Tosafot, TB *Bava Batra* 15a)? In that case he would be the latest named author in the entire work. Or, perhaps Solomon is the topic of the Psalm instead (Rashi, Ibn Ezra, Radak)? In that case this Psalm would be a rare one which fails to list its author.⁷ Either reading requires us to accept that this Psalm does not follow the expectations of its genre: because of the late author, or because of the absence of an author entirely. The best reading of the verse is that Solomon is the *subject* of the Psalm, which goes without an author. A similar challenge exists regarding Psalm 127:1 *To Solomon* and also in Psalm 90-91 and Psalm 92.⁸

Besides the unusual presentation of author and subject in Psalm 72, the genre or topic of this Psalm also differs from the bulk of the Psalms. Most of the Psalms in the first half of the book are concerned with prayer and thanksgiving in difficult times, while most of the Psalms of the end of the book are

focused on pure praise of the Almighty. Yet, the topic of this Psalm is neither of the conventional ones, with its focus on a human king. It stands out as one of a handful whose subject is a human king and thus breaks the typical convention in a second way (along with 2,⁹ and 45).¹⁰

Besides the explicit identification of Solomon as the subject in 72:1, there is reason to think that this Psalm is about the emerging monarchy of Solomon on account of the location of this Psalm within the larger book of Psalm. The Psalms were divided into five divisions already in ancient times (according to the start of *Midrash Shocheh Tov*), and a concluding blessing and affirmation concludes each section besides the last (Ps. 41:4, 72:18-19, 89:53, 106:48). Each of the five sections has a unique character. The final two sections are unique in that they consist mostly of unnamed Psalms that are pure praises, while the first two divisions are petitions and thanksgiving Psalms attributed to named authors. The third book is mostly the Psalms of Asaf, and the first two almost exclusively the Psalms of David. Thus, Psalm 72 ends the second of the five divisions with the words *Blessed is the Lord, God, God of Israel who alone does wondrous things; Blessed is His glorious name forever; His glory fills the whole world. Amen and Amen. End of the prayers of David son of Jesse* (Ps. 72:18-20). Psalm 72, thus, sits at the end of the bulk of the Davidic compositions, and fits as a transition from the elderly king to his son, the next king.¹¹

The Psalm recounts the many virtues of the prince and future king. He will judge fairly and remove oppression of the poor from the land (72:1-4, 72:12-14), will rule widely and in peace (72:5-9), and many foreign governments and kingdoms will visit bearing gifts (72:10-11). The Psalm ends powerfully with a praise of the King (72:15-17): *So let him live and receive gold of Sheba; let prayers for him be said always; blessings on him invoked at all times. Let abundant grain be in the land, to the tops of the mountains; let his crop thrive like the forest of Lebanon; and let men sprout up in towns like country grass. May his name be eternal, before the sun may his name be great (Yi-non).*¹²

This Psalm accurately describes some of the highlights of the early years of Solomon's rule: fair judgment of the lower classes (I Kgs. 3:16-28), vast empire with great peace (5:1-6), and visiting nations bearing gifts, including the gold of Sheba (10:1-29), as noted by Rashi (72:7, and Radak throughout the

chapter). Whether it is a blessing, prayer, or prediction of the king before his reign, or a song of thanks written during his reign, there is no reason to doubt the chapter speaks of Solomon and his great deeds. To summarize our brief study of this Psalm: there is no reason to think it speaks about the Messiah at all, and surely no reason to think that it bears any relevance to the origins of the Messiah.

THE PRIMORDIAL MESSIAH

Though the simple reading of this chapter speaks of Solomon, TB *Pe-sachim* 54a says it refers to the Messiah: “Seven things were created before the creation of the world: Torah and Repentance, and the Garden of Eden and Gehenom [the underworld], and the throne of Glory and the temple, and the name (or, identity) of the Messiah.” This list appears in variation, in a number of other Midrashim as well.¹³ The Talmud explains: “Torah as it says: *The Lord created me at the beginning of His course* (Prov. 8:22, translating as per Rashi Gen. 14:19). Repentance as it says: *Before the mountains came into being ... You decreed: repent you mortals!* (Ps. 90:2-3). Garden of Eden as it says *The Lord God, planted a garden in Eden from before.* (2:8, The simple reading of “*Mi-Kedem*” is “in the east,” but the Talmud clearly intends to read this as “from before.” See also TB *Ketubot* 8a and commentaries). Gehenom as it says: *Tifteh*¹⁴ *has been prepared from yesterday* (Isa. 30:33). Throne and Temple as it says *Throne of Glory, exalted from the first, the place of our Temple* (Jer. 17:12).¹⁵ The name of the Messiah: as it says *May his name be eternal, before the sun [was created] may his name be great (Yinon).*”

As we have already noted, the Talmud’s conclusion is shocking! Psalm 72 does not speak of the Messiah explicitly, and few commentaries believe it is describing the Messiah even implicitly (see Targum and Radak, if it is about the Messiah, then one would also argue that Solomon is also a name for the Messiah). Even were the chapter referring to the Messiah the verse only says that his name comes before the sun, and not that his name comes from primordial times. A series of later teachings expand and connect other parts of the chapter to the Messianic era (TB *Sanhedrin* 99a [citing 72:5])¹⁶ but this reading is truly difficult.

As an aside, we should note that it is also unclear how the Talmud understood the word, “Yinon.” The Talmud may well have understood this word as a *verb*, which is the simple reading of the text, the Messiah’s name will “Yinon.” The students of Yanai understood the word generations later as a *proper noun* (TB *Sanhedrin* 98b, *Lamentations Rabbah* to 1:16), “His name is Yinon.” Yet, this is a later teaching, one disputed by other rabbis who offer different names for the Messiah.¹⁷ It is unclear why “Yinon” would be the chosen name for the Messiah. Maharsha (TB *Nedarim* loc. cit.) explains that it is a word-play on the Tetragrammaton, with the later Nun (numerical value 50) taking the place of the letter Hey (numerical value 5).

Closer inspection of these texts reveals that the various primordial creations appear to be linked through the use of very specific key words to refer to an era before time. Perhaps the key words are more important than any other aspect of these creations. One such key words is “*kedem*,”¹⁸ the verse in Proverbs continues that the Torah is “*kedem*,” before, and the verse describing the Garden of Eden also uses the word *kedem*. The verse of Gehenom uses the word “*etmol*,” yesterday; the verse of the temple “*me-rishon*” or “*olam*.” Our true mission should be to find a verse elsewhere in the Bible which applies one of these key words to the Messiah, which had inspired the midrashic teaching.

MICAH 5:1

While Psalm 72 does not seem to speak of the Messiah or localize his origins at the dawn of time, Micah 5:1 does convey this sense: *And you (from) Bethlehem of Ephrath, least among the clans of Judah, From you one shall come forth to rule Israel for Me – one whose origin is from of old (kedem), from ancient times.* The entire chapter speaks of a Messianic era,¹⁹ and of a future descendent from the Davidic line. The verse is explicit that the origins of the Messiah is from the dawn of time and uses the same key word – *kedem* - which appeared in the context of two of the other six primordial creations.

It is self-evident that the author of the Midrash had this verse in mind as the true inspiration for the teaching that the Messiah emerges from the dawn of time, and indeed one version of the Midrash (*Pirkei d’Rebbi Eliezer* 3) preserves this second proof text. Moreover, Rashi in his commentary to Micah also understood this verse in the same way as the Talmud’s *Yinon shemo*,

even though his commentary to Psalms read the verse in a different way. This is yet another example of a situation where a Midrash has one proof text in mind which goes uncited, but clearly inspired the teaching.

One cannot help but wonder if the resistance to using Micah 5:1 was the result of polemical considerations. After all, once the Christians associated the origins of their own primordial messiah and deity to the city of Bethlehem, Jews would be skittish about discussing their Messiah in the context of Micah 5:1. Indeed, Radak explicitly rejects Christian readings of this verse (such as in John 7:42) in his commentary. And especially given that Christians believed their Messiah was divine and hence preceded the world, Jews would hesitate to do anything that might be seen as corroborating that position. For this reason, the Talmud and Midrash only noted that the *name* of the Messiah was eternal, but not that the human Messianic person had existed from the dawn of time.

There are numerous examples of cases where Jewish commentaries refuted or avoided Christological interpretations of biblical verses, and they have been documented and discussed in the general literature.²⁰ Our example is unique in that the core teaching remains in the Midrash and is not rejected – but it is merely the source for the teaching which has been moved from one text to another.

OF MIDRASH AND SOURCE

The Midrash often has knowledge of other biblical verses in mind when sharing a teaching, and often the apparent cited source is not the true source in actuality. There are numerous examples of this phenomenon, and our case is yet another example. A midrashic teaching which appears throughout the ranks of Midrash has its true basis in Micah but is consistently cited via Psalm 72. Astute readers of the Midrash recognize that the proof-text cited is never the end of the story. In this case, there is a specific reason why the conventional midrashim eschewed the true proof-text, although thankfully one source does preserve the actual source of the midrashic teaching.

NOTES

1. King David (2 Sam 23:1), King Hezekiah (TB *Sanhedrin* 94a based on Isa. 9:5-6), Cyrus (Ibid 45:1), and the Davidic king at the time of the destruction of the First Temple (Lam. 4:20) are all called the Messiah, literally, “the anointed one.”

2. To give some examples: Rashi Gen. 18:3 cites a Midrash that Sodom was destroyed on Passover, on the basis of the matzah in the verse, although the narrative parallels (destroyed city, safety in the house, *lehitmameha*) more broadly are truly the basis for the explanation. *Genesis Rabbah* 94:9 appears to derive the birth of Yocheved from the numerical counting of Gen. 46, when the real reason for the teaching is surely her specific inclusion in the parallel chapter Numbers 26 among the other descenders. *Genesis Rabbah* 98:5 interprets Gen. 49:6 as referring to the absence of Yaakov's name in Numbers 16:1, although undoubtedly the contrast between I Chron. 6:23 & 6:28 & 6:32 is the real inspiration for the teaching. TB *Taanit* 5b argues that "Yaakov did not die" citing Jer. 30, although undoubtedly Genesis 49:33 was the source of the idea (see Rashi Gen. loc. cit.). *Yalkut Shimoni* (286) cites a famous Midrash about mountains traveling to receive the Torah citing Jer. 46, although undoubtedly Psalm 68:16-17 is the true source. If the sick were healed at the moment of the giving of the Torah, the source is not the word "all" in Exodus 20:15, but the fact that Moshe no longer needs Aaron to speak for him from this moment forward in the Torah. *Yalkut Shimoni* (62) derives that the Gideon story took place on Passover from Judges 6:13, without mentioning that it had in mind other textual parallels throughout the chapter (6:17, 6:19, 7:13). TB *Gittin* 88a implies that Hoshea's removal of the border guards is derived from II Kings 17:3, but the source probably is the Passover narrative in II Chronicles 30. Hezekiah's portended death for not having children is derived by TB *Berakhot* 10a from the verses in I Kings 20, when probably it is derived from the unusual age of the king at the time of the birth of his eldest son in I Kings 21:1. The rebellion of Shevna in TB *Sanhedrin* 26a appears to be derived anachronistically from the verses in Isaiah 8, but it clearly is derived from the verses in Isaiah 22. Still other times, a Midrash shares a teaching without citing any source at all. The reason to think the builders of the Tower of Babel discussed building tools (*Genesis Rabbah* 38:10) is the unstated textual parallel to II Kings 6:1-7. Baby Moshe eating coals in *Exodus Rabbah* is inspired by the unreferenced initiation of other prophets (Is. 6). If Bilaam and Lavan are the same person (*Genesis Rabbah* 57:6), the reason must be the unstated textual parallel between Genesis 31:24 and Numbers 22:9. TB *Megila* 10b says there is no source besides tradition that Amotz and Amatzia were brothers, although the king's treatment of his brother the prophet in II Chron. 25 is probably the source. Many, many, further examples of this phenomenon could be cited, but this small list of examples helps frame our discussion that the true sources for Midrashim are often disguised and not apparent from the texts cited, themselves.

3. See TB *Bava Batra* 14b. There is some question in the interpretive tradition if the sons of Korach were the sons of the early biblical figure or later descendants (see Rashi and Ibn Ezra to 42:1, Tosafot to 15a), whether Yedutun (77:1) is the name of an instrument or a person, whether Eitan the Ezrachi (89:1) was a contemporary of David (I Kgs 5:1) or an earlier figure (TB *Bava Batra* 15a), etc.

4. Rashi consistently understands words conventionally taken to refer to the names of instruments to actually be occasions, and so in his view, the number of chapters which begin with the occasion in the title line is far larger.

5. Y. Medan, *ha-Mikra'ot Ha-Mitchadshot* (Alon Shvut: Herzog, 2015), 174, argues that the entire unit of 51-60 reflects historical occasions, with Psalm 53 alluding to the story of Naval in its opening, and Psalm 55 which is understood by the sages to refer to Doeig. Technically, however, 53 and 55 lack the typical format where the occasion is mentioned explicitly at the start of the Psalm.

6. This Psalm stands unique among all the Psalms: it does not have a named author, does not begin with the typical keywords (Mizmor, Maskil, Tefilah, Shir, Ashrei, Halelukah, Hodu, etc. [see TB *Pesachim* 117a]), is the only one set outside of Israel, and after the destruction (although see Ibn Ezra to 42:1), and is the only one with a dramatic mournful tone. It is beyond the scope of this essay to consider how this Psalm connects to the other ones in the book, but we would note that whatever the conclusion, it is *sui generis* in nature.

7. Some Psalms do not list their author but are actually continuations of the preceding psalm (see Psalms 2, 10, 43, 71, 91), but some clearly begin anew and have no author listed, see 66-67.

8. If written by David, a Psalm *about* Moshe, but see TB *Bava Batra* 14b. Rashi, Ibn Ezra, Targum and Radak all believe it was *written* by Moshe; Ibn Ezra cites literary reasons supporting his view. Psalm 92 is almost definitely a Psalm *about* the Shabbat, and not a Psalm *written by* the Shabbat, although the Shabbat morning prayers imagine that the Psalm is written by the anthropomorphized Shabbat Day, herself.

9. The second chapter of Psalms is clearly part of the 1st chapter, as the combined unit of 1-2 begins and ends with the keyword “Ashrei”. Yet, the themes of the two parts differ: the first part provides general wisdom about the importance of correct behavior, and the second focuses on the enthronement of the king.

10. This chapter is part of the larger unit of Psalms of the sons of Korach, which stitched together tell an eschatological narrative about the progression from exile (42-43, 44), to the enthronement of the Messiah (45), to a great war (46), recognition of God’s rule (47), a rebuilt Jerusalem (48) and the ultimate judgment (49); see Rashi to 42:1.

11. Since Psalm 72 is not the final one in the book written by David, commentaries debate in what way it can be said to reflect the conclusion of the prayers of David. One view, consistent with Solomon being the subject and David the author, is that this Psalm was the last one written chronologically in David’s life, as the poet imagines the new king from his deathbed, though it is published earlier in the book of Psalms (Ibn Ezra and Radak 72:1 and Rashi to 72:20). A second view in the Talmud (TB *Pesachim* 117) reads “*kol eliu*” – these all are the Prayers of David, instead of “end” although this is not the simple reading of the text. See also Radak to 72:20. Another interpretation distinguishes between the start of the Psalms which are almost exclusively written by David (54 out of 62 Psalms with authors are attributed to him, 87%), and the next section of 17 Psalms where only one was written by David.

12. *Yinon* is a verb, based on context and the parallelism to the first half of the line. Rashi understands the root “*nin*” to refer to rule (based on Prov. 29:21), which led Rashi to understand the verse as referring to the greatness of the rule. Radak takes it to mean “recall,” as a grandchild (*nin*) recalls a grandparent (see Gen. 21:23, Isa. 14:22). The word for sun appears at the end of the Psalm and also earlier in the paragraph. *Shemesh* or sun is the 29th word from the start (after the title), and 27th word from the end (besides the footer).

13. The Midrash appears in a variant form in *Genesis Rabbah* 1:4 and *Tanhuma Naso* 11 with the forefathers and Israel replacing Gehenom and the Garden of Eden. Since scripturally and philosophically it is easier to understand the view of the Talmud, we present that view in our analysis. The Midrash is also cited in variation in the first *Sifri* to *Ekev* (listing only the Torah, temple and garden of Eden), in *Midrash Psalms* 93 replacing Gan Eden and Gehenom with Israel (see also Midrash to 72 and 74 “That you acquired *kedem*”), and *Yalkut* Part 2 298, 806, 847, and 942. *Genesis Rabbah* 15:3 cites this teaching, but then argues that the Garden of Eden could

not have preceded creation. It also appears in Midrash Proverbs chapter 8, *Tanna d'Bei Eliyahu* 29.

14. A word for the underworld, on account of the burning pyre made for the Molekh worship in the original valley of Hinom (II Kgs 23:10). See TB *Eruvin* 19a. On how literal to take the fires of Gehenom, contrast Rashi's Selicha written for the fast of Gedalya, with Rambam *Laws of Repentance* chapters 8-9. The verse in Isaiah describes a valley of great burning, but in context need not mean the fires of the underworld, which is the way the Talmud clearly takes it. One wonders if the Talmud felt it necessary for Gehenom to be created contemporaneously as Gan Eden, insisting on a symmetry between the location of great everlasting reward and the place of great punishment. Still, the word "yesterday" indicates that irrespective of the ancientness of the Garden of Eden, there is reason to think textually that Gehenom also comes from a far earlier time.

15. The Talmud seems to equate the two, see also Rashi to Exodus 15:17. Alternatively the word "and" should be added in the translation (as Rashi on the Talmud implies): "The Throne of Glory, is most-high from the first, *and so too*, the place of our Temple." TB *Nedarim* and the Midrash cite a different verse for the throne "Your Throne is established from then, from eternity You are (Ps. 93:2)"

16. TB *Sanhedrin* 90b and TB *Ketubot* 111b also quote the chapter, connecting it instead with the revivification of the dead.

17. The students would assume the name of the Messiah is the same as their teaching, and the students of Yanai therefore preferred Yinon (see Rashi).

18. The word *Kedem* appears 87 times in the Bible, meaning in front of (Isa. 9:11 and Ps. 139:5), before (Ps. 119:152), East (most of the uses), and earlier times. Often, it refers to earlier times that still follow the creation of the world, the earliest moments of history (see Mic. 7:20, Ps. 44:2), or at least centuries previously (Lam. 1:7, 2:17, 5:21, II Kgs. 19:25=Isa. 37:26). Still, it is often taken to mean the primordial times (Deut. 33:27, Isa. 51:9, Ps. 68:34, 7:12, 78:2, Isa. 45:21). See also note 13. The Midrash sometimes takes instances where the word means "East" and takes it to mean primordial moments, see Rashi to Genesis 13:11, to Deuteronomy 33:15, *Genesis Rabbah* 38:7 (on 11:2).

19. Probably the same Messianic era predicted by Isaiah upon the fall of the Assyrians, but was never fulfilled; see TB *Sanhedrin* 94a and previous note. Micah is a contemporary of King Hezekiah and of Isaiah as per Micah 1:1.

20. See the many examples in David Berger *Persecution, Polemics, and Dialogue: Essays in Jewish-Christian Relations* (Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2010), 47, 82, 166, et al.



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